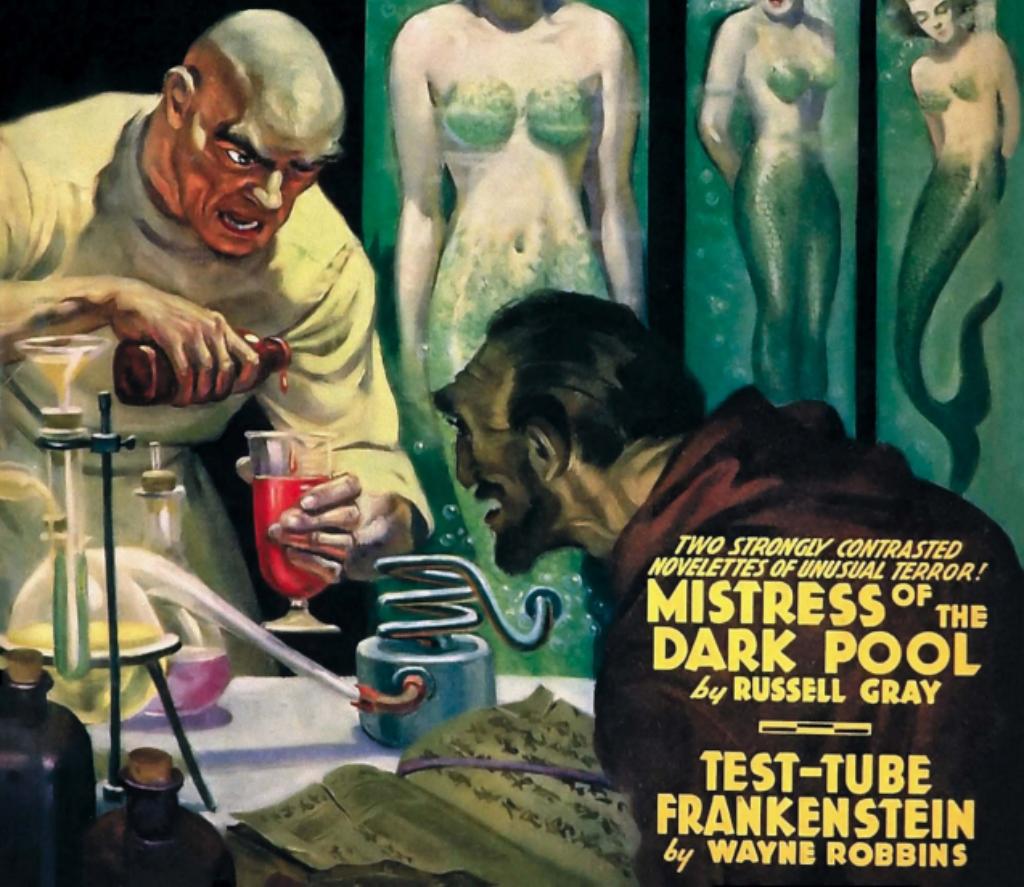


MAY

15¢ **TERROR** ALES



DONALD DALE
CHARLES
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TWO STRONGLY CONTRASTED
NOVELETTES OF UNUSUAL TERROR!
MISTRESS OF THE
DARK POOL
by RUSSELL GRAY

—
TEST-TUBE
FRANKENSTEIN
by WAYNE ROBBINS

TERBOR TALES



VOLUME TWELVE

MAY, 1940

NUMBER TWO

A LONG NOVEL OF WEIRD TERROR

The Book of Torment Harrison Storm 6

How could anyone have believed me when I said I had not committed those horrible torture-murders? For they had read the gloating admission of the ghastly crimes—and the handwriting was my own!

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Mistress of the Dark Pool Russell Gray 56

I could not help but laugh when that ancient hag told me I would take the place of her dead lover. For had I not my own lovely Cara? Yet there came a night when I promised to kill—that I might have the love of a wrinkled, leathery crone!

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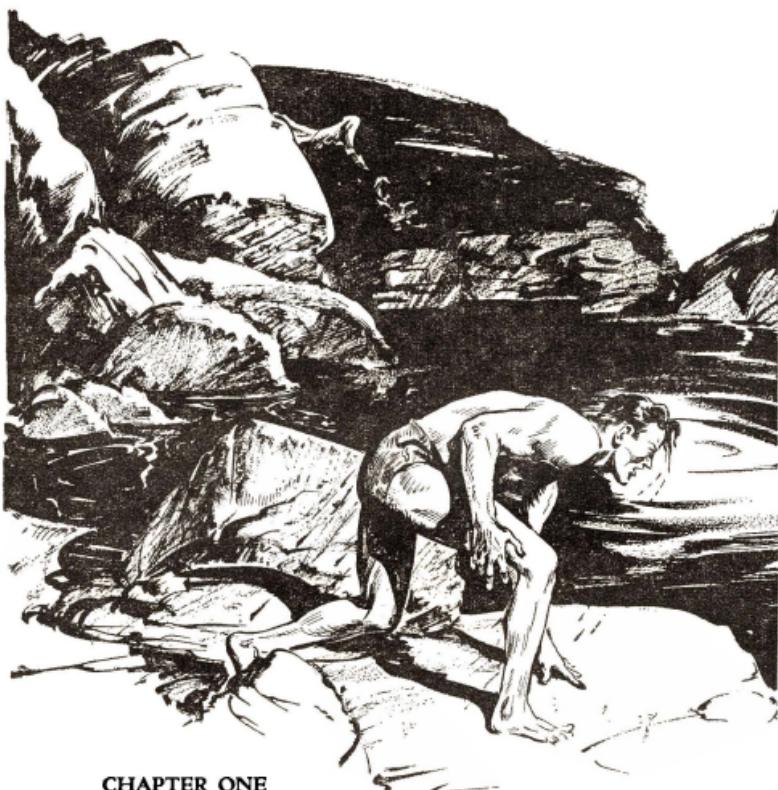
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MISTRESS OF THE DARK POOL

*A novelette of a horror
that could not be*

by

RUSSELL GRAY



CHAPTER ONE

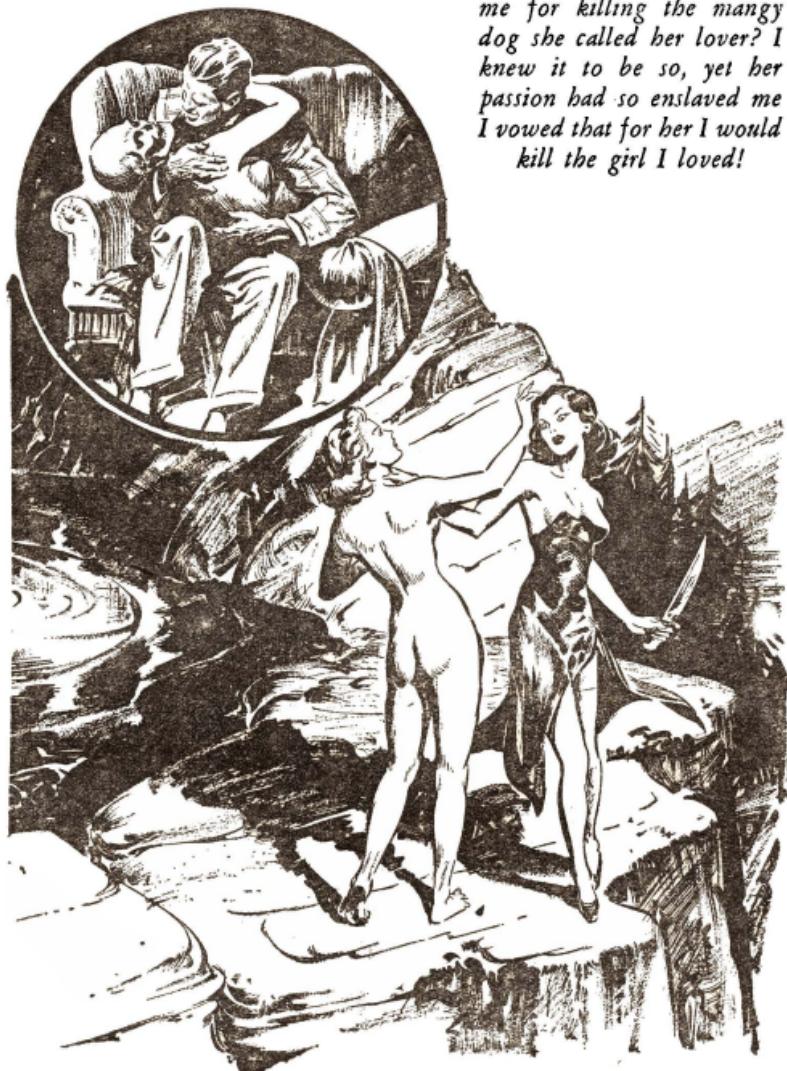
The Hag of Castle Hill

CARA and I had been married three years, yet I gasped with delighted admiration as she stepped out of her clothes and dove into the dark, mountain pool. Heated though I was by the climb to this isolated spot, I paused to watch her tan-and-white body cutting

through the limpid water. She came up to the surface, shaking her short brown curls and laughed with sheer exuberance.

In another moment my own clothes were piled on the rock and I felt the shock of tingling water close over me. We were like two children in the water —splashing and diving and playing tricks on each other. When at last we climbed

Was this beautiful and desirable woman, whom I held in my arms, actually the same being as that wrinkled and evil crone who had reviled me for killing the mangy dog she called her lover? I knew it to be so, yet her passion had so enslaved me I vowed that for her I would kill the girl I loved!



out and lay side by side basking in the sun on a large flat rock, I told myself that life was as nearly perfect as it ever would be.

The pool, formed by a spring, was at

the very summit of Castle Hill. It was enclosed by solid rock formation almost at the edge of a cliff which took an abrupt drop of a hundred feet. The hill itself was a good eight hundred feet above the

surrounding country, and the vista from where we lay was breath-taking.

Indeed, the view from our snug little summer bungalow nestling among the pines halfway up the hill was almost as magnificent. A week ago, Cara and I had rented that bungalow. Isolated, seven miles from the nearest village, it was an ideal place for me to finish my novel without interruption. The only thing it had lacked was a place to go swimming. That morning, when I had driven into the village for mail and supplies, Tom Anderson, owner of the general store, had told me about this pool at the very top of Castle Hill.

"A good four hundred foot climb from your place, but it's worth it," he had said. "The water's so clear you can see every pebble on the bottom."

"Does anybody use it?" I asked hopefully. There's nothing like swimming as nature intended.

Tom Anderson shook his head. "Too far away. And by the looks of that old witch and her man, I reckon they ain't been near water in years."

"Witch?" I said, interested. There always seemed to be stories of witches or curses or ghosts about out-of-the-way places. "You don't mean to say we've really inherited a witch?"

Tom Anderson nodded gravely. "Name of Hulda. Never had no other name, far's I know. Got a man with her—maybe her husband, maybe not—called Amos, a skinny, dirty little runt with a face like a bad dream. They never come to town nor go any place, but folks who climb the mountain see 'em now and then."

"And what makes her a witch?" I asked eagerly.

He shrugged. "Talk, I reckon. I don't take stock in witches myself, but there are folks around here that do. It's said there's some who climb up to her shack on top of Castle Hill to get charms and such-like stuff from her."

AS CARA and I lay on the rock, I told her about the witch named Hulda. We exchanged jokes about the possibility of buying a charm from her which would make my novel a best-seller.

Suddenly Cara frowned. "I hope her boy-friend Amos doesn't snoop around here. I'd hate to have to wear a bathing suit."

I raised myself on one elbow to look at her. She was like a wood nymph as she lay there stretched sensuously in the sun—slim and lithe, yet gracefully and excitingly curved. My blood ran suddenly faster. I reached out a hand and touched her. She turned to me, smiling, her eyes reflecting the brilliancy of the sun.

And then she was staring at something over my shoulder, and a half-startled, half-puzzled expression came into her face.

I twisted my head.

It was only a dog standing at the edge of the pool—a skinny, mangy cur with a brownish-yellow scabby pelt. As ugly a specimen as I had ever seen.

The cur whined in an oddly vibrant voice which I had never before heard issue from a dog's throat. Slowly he came toward us. I felt Cara sit up and lean against me. She was actually frightened.

"It's only a dog," I said.

"But look at his eyes! The way he's staring at me!"

It was true. There was something almost human in those liquid, blood-flecked eyes. The expressions of men who look at women they desire are not greatly different.

The cur sprang on the rock, and in another moment he was snuggling his grimy, scabby body against Cara's hip. With a little screech of revulsion, she bounded to her feet. I rose also, planting myself between Cara and the dog. He tried to skirt around me to get to her.

Not to attack her, certainly, and not even to be petted.

What *did* the dog want? We couldn't be sure, but the fact is that Cara cringed and attempted to cover her nakedness with her arms—because a dog stared at her!

The cur got past my guard. Cara cried out again. I leaped forward and caught him in the soft part of the belly with my bare foot. The kick wasn't hard, but it lifted him like a football and dropped him off the rock. Whining, he rolled over on his feet and started for Cara again. I picked up a small stone and hit him on the shoulder with it. He yelped, but maintained his ground.

"Beat it!" I said. "Get away from here."

I reached for another stone, this one as big as my fist, and as I raised it in a throwing position, the cur backed away. As if he had eyes in back of his head, he stopped with his hind legs just at the edge of the cliff and stood there.

"His eyes!" Cara whispered behind me. "I can't stand the way they're looking at me."

Neither could I. "Beat it!" I said again. And to show that I meant it, I hurled the rock.

I hadn't planned to hit the cur, and anyway I threw it too lightly to do any damage. But it did strike him, right between the eyes, and there was just enough force behind it to send the dog backward a foot or two. The brownish-yellow body dropped over the cliff. For an instant the forepaws clawed at the edge, and then they also disappeared. And we heard a scream of terror which no dog could have uttered—or so, at the moment, it sounded to us. It was filled with a quality which was almost human.

I walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down. There, on the jagged rocks below, I saw a brownish-yellow splotch.

"Dead," I said turning to Cara. "I

didn't mean to kill it." I could not understand why I felt like a murderer.

She was trembling. Wanly she attempted a smile.

"How silly we were," she said. "All the dog wanted was some affection. Let's go into the water again."

She dove and I followed. This time the water wasn't any fun. We stayed in only a couple of minutes.

I was stretching out my hand to help Cara out of the pool when a shrill cry of anguish cut the air. A very old woman in a black dress was peering over the edge of the cliff.

The first thing I thought of were my clothes. As quickly as I could I got into my slacks, then turned to the old woman.

I don't think that I have ever seen such hatred as was stamped on that wrinkled face which was the color and texture of old leather. Her gnarled body quivered with rage as she pointed an accusing finger at me. "You killed Amos!"

CARA stood at the edge of the pool with sunlight glistening on her wet skin and hair. She was like an artist's dream of beauty, save for the strange rigidity which had come into her face, robbing it of its vivaciousness. And I—all I felt was a vast emptiness within me.

Amos! The name of Hulda's husband or lover, according to Tom Anderson. No doubt this harridan was Hulda.

And then sanity returned and I was laughing inwardly. What in the world had come over me since the appearance of that dog?

I said: "I assure you that it was an accident. If there's anything I can do—"

"Do!" she burst out shrilly. "Bring back my lover to me. Can you do that?"

There it was—Amos, her dog; Amos, her lover. Were we all mad, or was it only the hag, who, living in loneliness on top of Castle Hill, had identified the dog with an unattainable lover?

Her coal-black eyes were fixed on me as I stood there in only my slacks. She started hobbling over to me, chuckling; and there was something about that sound which was more nerve-chilling than her rage had been.

"Yes, you can do something," she wheezed. "You can take Amos' place. You can come with me."

Madness can reach a stage where it becomes simply funny. I laughed aloud.

But Cara didn't think it funny. She snatched up her clothes and, holding them in front of her, came over to my side and tucked her hand through my arm. Her features were still set in that frozen mask.

The old woman had mounted the rock, and, hobbling on her cane and wheezing, she approached me. The laughter died in my throat as she reached out a withered hand and tapped my chest with crooked fingers.

"A fine figure of a man," Hulda mused. "A better body than Amos had. You'll do."

Her touch made my skin crawl. If she had been a man, I would have knocked her down. As it was, all I could do was brush her hand roughly away from me.

She did not take offense. Muttering, "Even better than Amos," she turned and hobbled off the rock. Cara and I watched her in silence until she disappeared among the pine trees.

"A crackpot," I said. "I suppose so many people have told her that she's a witch that she's come to believe it."

Cara didn't say anything. She was getting into her clothes. I slipped on my shoes and put on my shirt and then we started down by the path which curved around the hill at the side of the cliff.

Cara didn't speak until we reached our bungalow. Then she put both her hands on my shoulder and said: "Darling, I'm afraid."

"Of that harridan?" I scoffed.

"I don't know of what. But there was the way that dog looked at me and the sound of his voice as he fell down the cliff and the assured manner of the old woman when she said you would have to take its place."

I tried making wisecracks about the hag, but they had no effect on Cara. She only said: "Hold me close, Lane, darling."

That was something which was always a pleasure, and in the feel of her against me I forgot about the dog named Amos and the old woman. Later that afternoon I sat down at my typewriter, but none of my work went right. It took me a long time to get started, and when I did I tore up everything I wrote. It was not so much worry about what Hulda could possibly do to us as a strange restlessness which possessed me.

In the evening that restlessness grew stronger. Cara and I played two-handed rummy, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that I could keep my mind on the game. I brought out a bottle of rye and put it on the table beside me and took a drink after each game. Disapproval was on Cara's face, but she didn't say anything. Not that the whiskey had any effect on me. It was as though I were drinking water.

We went to bed early. For a long time both of us stirred uneasily. Presently Cara fell asleep, but I continued to lie wide awake. What in the world was the matter with me?

After a while I slipped out of bed and padded noiselessly out of the bedroom.

I'm not sure why I did that. Perhaps to get another drink. Perhaps to read until I was sleepy enough to return to bed. But I don't think so. Somehow I must have known that I would find the girl waiting for me in the other room.

CHAPTER TWO

Daughter of the Witch

I HAD never seen her before. She was lying on the sofa in the direct flood of the moonlight, and her face was turned toward the bedroom as if in expectation of my entrance. Her ankles were crossed and her hands were linked behind her raised head, lifting her breasts high.

I cannot tell you what she looked like, except that she was beautiful in a way which was not like that of any other woman I had ever seen. It may have been because the moonlight was deceptive, but I cannot be sure of that. Her dress was raven black, smooth and tight as skin. The skirt was slit, parting over her thighs.

Her face? I don't know. Lips blood-red; thick long hair blue-black and eyes the same color. And her skin—it wasn't that of a white woman or a black woman or a yellow woman. It was rather, I think, a mixture of all the races that had ever inhabited the earth.

She removed one hand from behind her head and held it out to me. "I have been waiting for you, Lane Butler," she said in a voice which was oddly low.

It did not occur to me to wonder how she knew my name. My mind was so overwhelmed by her presence that it did not even grope for an explanation as to who she was and what she was doing here. I simply stood there looking down at her curious beauty.

She slid off the sofa and came to me. I was a little surprised that she was not taller; the top of her head scarcely reached my shoulder. She was not anything like Cara, I thought: shorter, without Cara's flowing grace of movement and slender loveliness. And then all thought of Cara was wiped from my mind as she undulated toward me and stood against me.

Automatically my arms went about her. The material of her black dress had looked like skin and now it felt as smooth and warm and alive as skin. And when I touched the richness of her flesh, a thousand darts of fire tingled in my palms.

She allowed me to hold her for only a moment before she slipped out of my embrace. She took my hand in hers.

"Come," she said.

I hesitated. Again I thought of Cara—the woman I loved sleeping peacefully in bed in the other room. Cara, who loved me as ardently and who was more beautiful than this woman or any other woman.

"Come," she repeated.

I went.

Barefooted, clad only in my pajamas, I let her lead me out of the bungalow. She took the path up to the top of Castle Hill. As we walked side by side, I felt the movement and the warmth of her body against me, so that a fever mounted in me and I hurried.

I didn't think about where we were going. It did not matter.

Not until we reached the mountain pool where that afternoon Cara and I had swum did doubt cross my mind. I stopped.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

Her red lips smiled. "They call me Hulda."

I stared at her, trying to force thoughts through my numb brain. Hulda, the name of the old witch who had sworn that I would take the place of the lover whom I had killed! The lover who was a dog.

YET this girl, save for the color of her hair and eyes and the shortness of her stature, was as unlike the harridan as two women could be. Her daughter? That was it—her daughter. Suddenly I laughed as if it were a great joke. The hideous old mother wanted me, and I

was taking the beautiful young daughter instead.

"You must be old Hulda's daughter," I said.

She smiled again and, without answering, took my arm. I continued to laugh, and there was something crazy and unreal in my laughter. Far back in my mind I was afraid. In the dead of night on a desolate hilltop, my insane laughter would have frightened any normal woman. But Hulda only pressed my arm closer to her.

We entered a pine wood which blotted out the moonlight. I could see nothing, not even Hulda; but I could feel her at my side, and that was enough.

Presently we came to a shack in the center of a little clearing. The boards were unpainted and rotten and part of the roof sagged crazily where ancient beams could no longer hold the weight. There was no glass in the windows. Hulda pushed open a creaking wooden door and I followed her inside.

The shack consisted of a single room, furnished only with a rickety table and a rocker and wooden boxes for chairs and a single disheveled bed. One bed for old Hulda and her daughter and the man named Amos. But Amos was dead; he had fallen over the cliff. No, that had been a dog, in spite of the wild ravings of the harridan. My thoughts were in chaos and then I didn't bother about them as Hulda stopped at the bed and turned to me.

"Suppose your mother should walk in on us?" I whispered as I took her in my arms.

"Don't let that worry you."

I felt rather than saw that her dress was no longer on her. Flame leaped from her as she pulled my head down to her blood-red lips.

Later I fell into a heavy, haunted sleep in which the horrible aged face of old Hulda mocked and leered at me. I was awoken by somebody shaking me; and

as I felt a head nestling in the curve of my shoulder and the soft length of a feminine body along my side, I told myself that I had dreamed about Hulda's daughter and that I was at home in bed with Cara. A vast load lifted from my chest.

And then my eyes were open, and etched in moonlight at my side was the strangely beautiful form of the young Hulda.

"You must go now," she said.

Feeling her in my arms, I could not be sorry that she was not Cara. I kissed her.

"Go before it is light," she insisted urgently.

She was right. It was wisest that I reach home before Cara awoke, and before the old witch returned from wherever she had gone.

She followed me to the door. "Tonight I'll come again," she said. "Now please hurry."

It was still dark among the pines, but when I reached the pool I saw the orange glow of the sun in the east.

I had almost reached the bungalow when I met Cara coming up the path. She had slipped a housecoat over her nightgown and was hurrying. A gasp of relief came from her and she flew to my arms.

"I woke up and you weren't in the bungalow," she quavered. "I was so worried. I thought—well, I had a crazy notion that that horrid old witch had somehow lured you up to her place."

REMORSE filled me. God, how could I have betrayed Cara for any woman on earth! "I couldn't sleep," I said. "I thought a swim would do me good and so I went up to the pool."

She believed me until we reached the front of our bungalow. Then she went suddenly rigid as she gaped at me with something like horror.

"You went up there barefooted and in your pajamas?" she muttered.

"I guess it was silly." I tried to laugh it off.

"Your hair, Lane—it's dry. You weren't in the water."

Her logic angered me unreasonably. "Don't try to play detective," I snapped. "I went in feet first, and the water was so cold that I rushed out without ducking my head."

She didn't believe me. It wasn't only as if as good a swimmer as I would go into a deep pool any other way but diving; it must have been something in my expression as well.

"Lane!" she moaned. "That old woman!" The back of her hand covered her open mouth.

Old woman indeed! An exotic, passionate girl who made Cara appear dull and pallid by contrast. Almost I shouted that information at her, but I managed to check myself.

I strode past her and into the bungalow. In the bedroom I stripped off my pajamas and reached for my clothes. Weariness overcame me, and I flopped down on the bed and fell asleep.

It was past noon when I awoke. Cara was seated on the sofa on which Hulda had been outstretched last night. Her hands were folded on her knees and she was staring at nothing at all. She was wearing shorts and a cool white blouse. I stood there looking at her, wondering what madness could have possessed me to have left her for the embraces of another woman.

"Cara!" I said hoarsely and stepped toward her.

Without looking at me, she stood up and evaded my arms and went into the kitchen. Five minutes later she came out. "Your breakfast is on the table," she said dully, and left the house.

Later through the window I saw her seated under a pine tree, not reading, not

doing anything. Her face was strained, her eyes red. My heart went out to her, but going to her would only make it worse.

I tried to work, but my fingers were numb on the typewriter keys. A single thought kept drumming through my mind: Hulda had said that she would return tonight. I would drive her out of the house. She wasn't worth Cara's little finger. God knew I didn't want Hulda!

Didn't I?

I returned to the whiskey bottle and emptied it down my throat, then broke open another. Again the whiskey didn't do any good. Damn it, couldn't I even get decently drunk?

With the coming of night, a tense expectancy came over me. A vein throbbed in my throat. Good heavens, I was eagerly waiting for Hulda!

The meal that evening was as gloomy as it could be. Cara and I did not exchange a single word. We did not look at each other. After we finished the meal we sat around, doing nothing. And Cara's presence in the room became increasingly less important.

I was waiting for the coming of Hulda.

Presently Cara stood up and spoke to me for the first time since noon.

"Are you coming to bed?"

I nodded. It would simplify matters if she fell asleep before the arrival of Hulda.

Cara did not put on a nightgown that night. She dropped off her clothes and stretched languidly before slipping into bed. She must have guessed that I had another rendezvous on the hilltop that night, and she was using the breathtaking enticement of her body to keep me with her. To save me. And she failed.

I scarcely glanced at her as I pulled off my shoes, my mind filled with anticipation of Hulda. With a sob of mingled despair and defeat, she slid between the covers.

For the second night we lay sleeplessly

in bed. At my side I could hear her agitated breathing. At long last sleep overtook her. I rose on one elbow, watched the regular rise and fall of her bosom, then noiselessly got out of bed. This time I put on sneakers—the stones and twigs had been hard on my feet last night—and a bathrobe.

There in the moonlit room Hulda lay on the sofa.

CHAPTER THREE

Creature of Night

BARE feet pattered behind me. I looked over my shoulder. Cara stood in the doorway of the bedroom. One hand was clutched at her throat as she gaped incredibly at Hulda lying on the sofa; her lips were working, but no sound issued from between them.

Hulda's husky laughter rang out. She rose from the sofa and put an arm about me possessively.

"Come, Lane Butler," Hulda said.

"No!"

Cara's voice had at last broken past her paralyzed throat. She ran over to me, grabbed my arm and clutched it to her breast. "Lane, who is this woman?"

"Go away," I told her roughly in a voice which did not sound like my own. "Can't you see that I have no use for you?"

It wasn't quite what I meant to say. I retained enough love for her not to want to hurt her more than necessary, but the words came out by themselves.

Cara looked at me with such terror in her eyes as I had not believed a human being could endure and remain sane. My heart twisted within me, and for fleeting moments I was torn by indecision as I stood between the two women.

"Come," Hulda urged.

And Hulda won. It didn't make sense, but her lure—her will perhaps—was

stronger, while I had no will left that could be called my own.

"Lane, darling, you mustn't!" Cara cried. "I'm more to you than a hundred women like this creature can be. Stay here with me."

I tried to push her off, but she clung to me, her voice and eyes imploring. Brutally I broke her grip. With a moan she slumped down to the floor. Sobs wracked her torso.

And those sobs were drowned out by the laughter of Hulda as arm in arm we left the bungalow and started up the path to the top of Castle Hill. . . .

Once again Hulda woke me just before dawn. "It is time for you to leave," she whispered.

I crushed her to me. "I want to stay with you always, to live here with you."

"And your wife?" she mocked.

My wife was somebody I had known in the remote past. Cara did not matter. Nothing on earth mattered any longer save to be with this woman.

"It is nearly dawn," she told me. "You must go at once."

She had said something like that the night before. Odd. Why didn't she want me to remain until daylight?

"I'm staying," I declared.

I sought for her mouth. She protested, struggling, but as my lips burned against hers she succumbed with a little sigh.

I must have fallen asleep again, because when I next opened my eyes the rising sun sent shafts through the window. Hulda was still in my arms, but somehow she felt different. When my hand touched her shoulder, I did not feel rich, smooth flesh. The skin was tough and cracked. She must have put on a leather jacket, I thought dully, and turned my head to look at her.

I SCREAMED with revulsion. In my arms lay the body of the old witch—the shrivelled, twisted, leathery body! Her

coal-black eyes glinted mockingly up at me and shrill laughter poured from her aged, bloodless lips.

I pulled away from her, leaped over her off the bed, and rushed out of the shack. I didn't stop running until I reached the pool. There I ripped off my pajamas and dove in.

The water was icy and sent tingling shocks through me. I went under again and again, but the water couldn't wash away the uncleanness from my mind and soul.

I climbed out of the pool and lay in the sun. That didn't help either. The old witch had had her vengeance for the death of her dog or lover or whatever he had been. She had sent her daughter to lure me up to their shack, and with the coming of dawn they had changed places while I lay asleep. God knew that I had been punished for what I had done to Cara!

When at last I roused the courage to go down to the bungalow and face my wife, I found her anxiously waiting outside the door for me. There was no anger in her face, no recrimination; only infinite pity.

"I'm not going to leave you, Lane," she said. "I suppose you expect that, are even hoping for it. Perhaps sooner or later I will, but first I have to get you away from the spell of that creature."

I fell at her feet and sobbed like a child. "We'll leave here, Cara, at once."

Her hand strayed through my hair. "No, Lane. Flight wouldn't break her hold over you."

"It's broken," I said. "I swear it."

And I believed my words. How could I ever again bring myself to touch that dissolute, evil daughter of a witch?

All morning Cara hovered near me, as if to let me draw strength from her courage and love. The bitter contempt she had felt for me yesterday was gone; in its place was compassion and perhaps un-

derstanding. And yet abstracted, brooding, I hardly noticed her. Chilling thoughts were pricking through the fog in my brain.

Why had young Hulda insisted that I leave before dawn if she had planned to let her mother exchange places with her? And why had she waited until the second night?

I had to find the answer.

After lunch I started down the hill to my parked car. "Lane!" Cara called after me in a voice filled with fear.

"I'll be right back," I said. "I'm just driving into town for mail."

I'm not sure that she believed me. As I got into my car, I noticed her figure among the trees. She'd come down after me to make sure that I really drove off instead of cutting around to the uphill path. She didn't trust me—and who can blame her?

Tom Anderson was alone in his general store when I entered. I got my mail out of my box, bought cigarettes, then said nonchalantly: "You didn't tell me that old Hulda had a pretty young daughter."

"Daughter?" He studied my face. "She's got no daughter."

"I saw her last night," I insisted. "She said her name was Hulda."

His thin mouth twitched in a weather-beaten face "What'd she look like?"

"She's—well—" I paused. I couldn't describe her save to say that she was curiously exotic and that her flesh was warm and exciting. I had seen her only in the moonlight—deceptive and vague. "She looks a little like her mother," I said. "She's short, only much fuller, of course, and as beautiful as her mother is ugly."

ANDERSON shook his head. "I lived in these parts all my life, Mr. Butler—forty-seven years. For thirty years and more I've been seeing Hulda on and off. Always she's lived up there alone;

except the last few years with Amos. Never heard of her having a daughter and neither has anybody else: We'd know."

"But I tell you I saw her."

"Did the girl say she was Hulda's daughter?"

"Not in so many words," I said. "She told me her name was Hulda, so I assumed—"

My words broke off and we stared at each other. My knees were so shaky that I could hardly stand.

Anderson spoke slowly, each word separated. "Maybe she was Hulda herself."

"But that's impossible," I argued, as much with myself as with him. "She was young and beautiful."

"Maybe it was Hulda," he repeated doggedly.

A damn superstitious yokel, I told myself savagely. But now I was trembling all over.

I said: "You told me about Amos who lived with her. Did you mean that Amos was a man or a dog?"

"Dog?" he echoed. "Old Hulda never had a dog. Amos is a mangy little runt who went up to Castle Hill one day a couple of years ago and stayed. Saw him two days ago when I went hunting. Never heard of no dog around Hulda's shack. . . . What's the matter, Mr. Butter, ain't you feeling good?"

"Headache," I muttered, passing a cold palm over my forehead.

I made my way out of the store, got into my car and sat behind the wheel, motionless, so tired that I could not move a muscle. Tom Anderson was peering out at me from the store window.

Finally I roused the energy to start the car and drive away. Two names for four creatures. Hulda the old witch; Hulda the seductive young girl. Amos the old woman's lover; Amos the dog I had killed. Why had I never seen the two

Huldas or the two Amoses together? That didn't mean anything—but other things did. That mangy cur had looked at Cara's nakedness out of human eyes and had cried out with a human voice when he had fallen off the cliff to his death. And the harridan had said that the dog had been her lover and that I was to take his place.

God in heaven, had I actually become her lover? Were the two Huldas the same creature—with the strangely voluptuous body only a creature of the night, reverting to her natural ugliness with the coming of daylight? That was why I had seen her only at night; why she had been so anxious that I leave her before dawn.

When I returned to the bungalow, I saw Cara at work on the little garden she was planting in back. I slipped through the front door without letting her see me. In the kitchen I found a sharp carving knife. I stuck it in my belt and sneaked away from the house.

I didn't want to let Cara know what I had planned to do. This was between myself and the old witch. Tonight might be too late. I knew that under the spell of the young Hulda's body I would be powerless. But it would not be too hard to bring myself to kill the repulsive harridan who was Hulda during the daytime.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Two Are One!

OLD Hulda sat amid the squalor of her shack in the dilapidated rocking chair and, as she swayed back and forth, crooned a song which contained no melody. It was more like a shrill jabbering incantation than anything else.

Did she know that I had come to kill her? Was she asking the devil, her master, for help?

I turned away from the window. Not yet. There were still three or four hours

of daylight left, and before I killed I had to be sure that the two Huldas were really one.

In the next couple of hours I covered, I imagine, every square inch of the crest and upper slopes of Castle Hill. I saw no other being. There should have been two others—a young girl whom I had seen only at night and a skinny, mangy-looking man. Had either of them been on Castle Hill, I would have come across him or her. Both might have gone down the hill for the day, but that would be stretching coincidence too far. And Tom Anderson had said that Hulda had no daughter.

I returned to the shack. At the side I came across a low mound of fresh dirt at the head of which was a slab—no cross, of course—on which “AMOS” was printed in black paint. The grave was at least six feet long. Would she have dug a grave that size for a dog?

I was convinced. I took the carving knife out of my belt.

There was a vast vacuum under my ribs, and yet I felt no horror at what I was about to do. I couldn't think of myself as a man bent on murder. There was a creature that had to be exterminated for my own safety and Cara's and perhaps for the safety of others.

I pushed the door open and stepped into the shack.

The hag was on her feet, leaning on her gnarled cane, as if expecting me. In her black eyes and on her withered lips there was the same mocking expression I had seen that morning when I had found her in my arms. And because she showed no fear of me, it was I who became afraid.

“Put up that knife,” she ordered in her cracked voice.

I tried to pull my eyes away from the steadiness of her gaze and I could not. It was an effort for me to take two steps toward her, and then I had to stop as if a wall had come up in front of me.

“Where's your daughter?” I demanded.

She laughed. “I have no daughter. You killed my lover. It is right that you should have taken his place.”

With a choked cry I leaped at her. No, leaped isn't the way to put it, although I had gathered my muscles and thrown myself at her with upraised knife. To my surprise and horror I found my movements sluggish, as in a nightmare.

She did not step back; no hint of fear crossed her face. She waited until I was almost on her; then her cane flicked out with remarkable speed and dexterity for a woman her age and struck me across the wrist. The knife fell from my hand.

I stood staring at her, trapped by the power of her intense, hate-filled eyes. I didn't need the knife; I could have wrung her scrawny neck like a chicken's; yet I continued to stand there as if rooted to the spot.

“You killed my lover and now you tried to kill me,” the old witch spat. “For that you must be punished. Now get out.”

I obeyed her. I wandered out of the shack as if in a dream. When I reached the pine wood, I started running and did not stop until I was inside of my bungalow.

CARA was still working on the garden in back. I saw the half-filled bottle of rye on a table—all that remained of my supply—and attacked it. I was downing my third hooker when suddenly the glass stopped halfway to my mouth. It was the whiskey that had done it! I dropped the glass, then lifted the bottle by the neck and dashed it against the wall. The bottle shattered.

“Lane!” Cara came running into the bungalow. “Lane, what's happened?” She looked at me and then at the broken bottle.

“The whiskey was drugged!” I cried. “While we were out of the bungalow, Hulda sneaked in here and put something in the bottles. Good God, it has to be

that, or else I'm stark raving mad!"

She put an arm about my waist and gently led me to the sofa. I buried my face in her lap while she patted me.

That was when I told her everything. She winced when I put into words how I had spent two nights in the shack with the young Hulda and she cried out when I told how I had tried to kill the old witch.

"They are one," I moaned. "In the daylight she is an old hag, her natural form. At night the devil permits her to assume the guise of a desirable young woman."

But Cara was more rational than I. After all, much as my unfaithfulness had hurt her, she had not gone through my harrowing experience.

She said: "You mentioned that the whiskey was drugged. That's possible. And when you tried to—to kill her before, why were you so helpless? Your mind must have been undermined by the drugs and so it had been easier for her to hypnotize you."

"That's it," I agreed eagerly. "And it's the same reason why I went with the young Hulda—drugs and some hellish form of hypnosis." Suddenly my voice went low and hoarse again. "But that doesn't explain the essential horror—the two being one or the one being two."

Cara said: "They say the Indian fakirs do impossible tricks through hypnotizing individuals or groups into seeing things which aren't so. Like a rope standing up in thin air and then disappearing. You never saw this young Hulda except in the vagueness of moonlight. Could you—" there was a catch in her voice—"have imagined that she was young and beautiful?"

I sat up and gaped at her. Having made love to a creature of hell was horrible enough. But to think that it had really been the old harridan whom I had kissed and embraced!

I slid away from Cara, as if I were so unclean that my touch would forever soil her. But she moved after me and held me in her arms, and for a long time we sat like that.

Presently she spoke. "You were right this morning, darling. We'll leave at once."

"No. You said we have to face her and defeat her right here. It is the only way I'll ever be able to call my soul my own again."

I uttered the words, but they weren't really mine. They seemed to come from outside myself. The sun had sunk below the hill and twilight lay in the bungalow. Soon it would be night, the time when the curiously exciting creature with whom I had been the last two nights would again come into being.

I buried my face in my hands. I didn't want to leave. I wanted the night so that Hulda would come to me. I was doomed and there was nothing I could do about it.

Cara's eyes were on me, frightened once more. She knew that I had not told the truth.

"Darling, come now," she begged. "Before it's too late."

I stood up, the movement tearing her arms from me. I walked back and forth like a caged animal, not saying anything, and Cara left off her pleading. She must have known that it would be futile.

NIIGHT came. We went through the motions of sitting down at the dinner table, but neither of us really ate. Then we returned to the living room. I slumped down on the sofa and stayed there a long time with my hands between my knees. Cara was curled up on a chair, her eyes never leaving me. Both of us waited for the coming of Hulda.

And I wanted her to come. Whether she was really the old hag seen through a drugged hypnotic spell did not matter

as the night lengthened. Cara's loyalty and love and devotion did not matter either. I wanted Hulda if it meant going to the depth of hell for her.

Neither of us went to bed. Cara stayed there in the chair, keeping me in the bungalow by her presence.

Only once she spoke. "Fight it, Lane. Your will can be stronger."

My will? I had none. It was the drugged whiskey, I told myself dully; but knowing that really didn't make any difference.

Glancing over at Cara, I noticed that her eyelids were drooping. She had not slept the night before, waiting for me to return, and now drowsiness was overcoming her. Breathlessly I watched Cara nod and then jerk her head up.

Eventually she was fast asleep. I tiptoed out of the bungalow. If Hulda would not come to me, I would go to her.

She was waiting for me near the pool. The path of a white half-moon streamed over her left shoulder. She was wearing that same, skin-tight black dress. Moonbeams danced in her blue-black hair and her velvet skin of undefinable color.

I put my hands on her. This was not the body of a withered hag. It was young skin and flesh. She shrugged me off and her blood-red lips twisted in a scowl.

"Do you think you can try to kill Hulda in the afternoon and embrace her at night?"

"Forgive me," I pleaded. "I didn't know what I was doing."

"It's your wife," she said. "She comes between us. You must get rid of her."

I wasn't myself. The being I had become cried: "I'll send her away."

She shook her head. "That won't do. You must kill her."

The shock of her words brought me back a little way to normal. I flinched away from her. She moved after me, stood so close to me that her breasts brushed against me. I couldn't keep my arms from closing about her.

"Last night you said you wanted to stay with me always," she said. "This is your chance."

I swayed as if drunk or very ill and said nothing.

"Listen to me," her voice went on. "Go down to your bungalow and ask her to go swimming with you in the pool. When she is in the water with you, hold her under. You can say that she was drowned by accident."

"No," I moaned. "I'll send her away. I'll make her hate me so that she'll no longer come between us. But I can't kill her."

She slid away from me and there was contempt on her face. "I thought you wanted me. Don't come near me until she is dead."

I tried to look away and found it im-



possible. Her body was all I could see or think of.

"And you'll be waiting for me?" I asked. "You'll be mine forever?"

"Yes."

It was somebody else—or something else—possessing my body who turned and started down the hill.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death on the Cliff

CARA was still asleep, her head stirring fitfully on the arm of the chair. I strode quickly over to her and shook her shoulder. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I would be able to return to Hulda.

She awoke with a start. "Lane!" she cried with a voice of fear. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and gripped my hand. "I had the most awful nightmare, darling. I can't recall what it was, but—"

"Cara, you've got to help me," I cut in. "I'm going mad. That woman is drawing me away. I thought perhaps a swim in the pool would help; it's icy-cold at night. But I don't trust myself to go up there alone."

"But the pool's on top of the hill, so near to—" She couldn't bring herself to mention Hulda's name.

"That's why I want you to come with me," I said.

Her face swam before me through a mist. She wasn't my wife or even a woman, but only an obstacle I had to eliminate in order to obtain Hulda permanently. My words may or may not have fooled her, but my impatient and at the same time abstracted manner did not. She must have known that I had been out of the bungalow while she slept. For a moment the outline of her features became clear, and they were twisted with something worse than horror and despair. Almost I was jerked back to my former

self, but the mist returned, coming again between her and myself.

"All right, then, I'll go alone," I snapped.

"No, wait." Her voice was thin and very tired.

She took my arm and silently we walked up the path. When we reached the pool, she stepped out of her clothes and waited for me. She stood where several minutes before Hulda had stood, and the moonlight also lay over her shoulder, and moonbeams reached out to caress her brown curls and the glory of her body. But I scarcely glanced at her. I ran past her and dove.

The night-cooled water sent myriad tingling knives into my skin. But it could not cool the fires burning within me or blot out the image of Hulda.

I broke through to the surface. Cara was still standing on a rock, looking past me as if she were searching the pool for something.

"Come on in," I called impatiently.

Her white body cut the surface cleanly. I ducked my head and saw her form swimming gracefully under water toward the opposite side.

Now, a voice that was not my own penetrated my brain. Get it over with quickly!

I reached her when she was starting to come up. My arms flung themselves about her waist, pulling her down. She thrashed, trying to fight her way up, but I held on. My lungs began to burn. If I tried to hold her down this way I would drown as quickly as she did. My hands moved up her slippery body, tightened on her shoulders, and with the weight of my body I pushed myself up at the same time that I shoved her down.

A terrific blow crashed on the top of my head, jolting me to the spine. Every muscle in my body went numb. Cara squirmed out of my grip. Too late I realized that Cara and I had been beneath

a rock shelf which hung four or five feet over the pool and the bottom of which was under water. Blackness closed in over me. I did not know that water was filling my lungs. For the next few minutes I knew nothing at all. . . .

WHEN I opened my eyes again, I was out of the pool, lying on my stomach on the huge flat rock. I felt Cara astride my back; felt her palms on my ribs as she pumped water out of me. And with every forward motion of her torso I heard a sob tear from her throat.

I had recovered more than consciousness. I had recovered my soul. And when I thought of how I had tried to murder the woman I loved, I regretted that she had not let me die.

Feebly I twisted around so that I faced her.

"Cara!" I moaned. "I tried to kill you! I don't deserve to live."

Through a mist of tears she smiled. I tried to sit up, but weakness sent my head back on the rock.

She stretched out at my side, put an arm over my chest. "Lie still, darling! You're all right now."

"You knew that overhanging rock was there?"

"Yes," she said simply. "That's why I swam to it. I had to take the chance that it might kill you. If—if you had murdered me in the pool and gone to that creature, you—well, you would have been better off dead."

"You should have let me die!" I cried. "I'm no good. You can't save me. That witch will come again and then—"

"No! I won't let her."

A screech as of a wild animal rent the night air. Cara sat up and I saw her face go taut with terror. Then she was on her feet and running off the rock.

It required all my strength to rise on my elbow and turn my head. And then I too was screaming as I saw the young

Hulda come rushing from the pine trees, her long blue-black hair streaming behind her, her thighs flashing between the slit of her black dress. And in her upraised right hand she clasped the carving knife with which I had attempted to kill the old witch that afternoon.

She must have been watching us from the trees; had seen Cara drag me out of the pool, had heard our words. And she must have known that Cara had defeated her.

"Cara, don't!" I yelled. "Run away!"

But Cara was running straight for Hulda, to intercept her before she could reach me with the knife. Desperately I got to my feet, and could do no more than totter there as the two women met.

Again I screamed as the knife drove down at Cara. She swung her body aside, and the blade sliced skin from her upper arm. Then Cara had both her hands clamped over Hulda's knife-wrist, and she brought her knee up into Hulda's stomach. Hulda fell backward, dropping the knife amid the weeds.

Weakness sent me down on my knees. Hulda had bounded up again and both women were grappling, gouging, biting. The blood from Cara's wound flowed over her white body and splotched Hulda.

On hands and knees I was crawling off the rock. Hulda was screeching, not in her own voice, but cracked and shrill with the voice of the old witch. Her black gown had been ripped off by Cara's tearing fingernails and now she was also naked. Blood which did not come from Cara's knife wound spotted both their bodies as teeth and nails ripped flesh.

Hulda was weakening more rapidly. Cara was taller and more supple and she was fighting for the man she loved. And, crawling, I had almost reached them to add what little strength I had to Cara's.

"The cliff!" I shrieked suddenly.

Neither of them knew that they had moved nearer and nearer to the edge of

the cliff until now they were only two or three feet away.

SOMEHOW I found myself on my feet, stumbling toward them. Hulda's heels were at the very edge now. She cast a frantic glance behind her and pressed herself against Cara. It was too late. Her heels came down on nothingness; she tottered backward. With a wild cry she gripped Cara. Her weight pulled Cara after her.

But by that time I had reached them. I lunged, flinging my arms about Cara's waist.

I felt her falling away from me.

Then Hulda was gone. Her scream keened out thinly, and was abruptly cut off. Cara's legs were over the edge. I dropped to my knees, hanging onto her. In my weakened condition her weight was too much for me. Both of us would slide over.

Suddenly the tug of Cara's body eased. She had pressed her torso against the ground, lessening the drag of her weight. After that it was not hard to pull her up to firm ground.

I left her there and fetched my shirt and tore it into strips and bandaged her wounds. After that we lay in each other's arms on the ground, waiting for strength to return to us.

"What was she, Lane?" Cara muttered.

"I couldn't have been drugged; I tasted none of that whiskey. How could the old hag have hypnotized me into seeing her young and beautiful? How could she have kept me under the spell while I fought her? There must have been two of them."

I said nothing.

Presently we were strong enough to make our way down to our bungalow. Sheer exhaustion closed our eyes with sleep as soon as we hit the bed.

The next morning we quickly packed our belongings and carried them down to the car. At last we were ready to leave forever the spot where we had anticipated a joyous summer and which had been turned into a section of hell.

"Wait here, Cara," I told her. "I'll be right back."

"I'm going with you," she said quietly, understandingly.

So together we crashed through under-brush to the foot of the cliff. Hulda lay crushed on the rocks.

Not the young, hellish, exotic girl whose lure had almost overcome me. Clutching each other, Cara and I stared at the nude, withered body of the old witch. Crooked lines of dried blood ran over the leathery skin where Cara's fingernails had ripped flesh last night. We did not speak as we slowly walked back to the car. There was nothing either of us could say. . . .

THE END